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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN'S GERMAN MINORITY IS MORE THAN JUST A SHOWPIECE

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Although their community shrank dramatically in the 1990s, ethnic Germans remain one of the largest and best organized minority groups in Kazakhstan. The German government provides the German minority significant resources to strengthen its minority Association, improve its economic prospects, and solidify its place in Kazakhstani society. Aleksandr Dederer, the long-time president of the German minority Association, is a source of strong leadership in both the Association, which has 23 chapters throughout the country, and its chamber of commerce, which has scored recent victories in promoting its members' commercial interests. The German minority newspaper is currently beholden to tight Ministry of Information requirements, but its editor envisions a more independent paper with expanded minority-community readership. Finally, ethnic German scholars and scientists, supported by the German government, are a well-connected part of the Kazakhstani intellectual elite. End Summary.

Germans in Kazakhstan: Ich bin kein Berliner!

¶2. (SBU) Kazakhstan's Germans are descendants of Volga Germans exiled to present-day Kazakhstan during World War II. Almost one million ethnic Germans resided in Kazakhstan when the USSR collapsed. But thanks to an open visa and naturalization regime and generous welfare provisions in Germany, Germans left Kazakhstan in droves after the country became independent. However, in Germany many of the new arrivals struggled to integrate as they were labeled troublesome "Russians". Minority representatives here now claim about 1000 German families per year are returning to Kazakhstan, where prior out-migration has created economic opportunities in traditionally German sectors. Today the German minority numbers about 226,000 and lives predominantly in northern Kazakhstan, around Karaganda, Kostanay, Petropavlovsk, and Pavlodar.

¶3. (SBU) Despite the fact that many Germans have intermarried and only a small percentage speak German, their identity remains strong and emotional, not least due to a history of persecution and hardship. Cultural traditions, especially surrounding Protestant holidays, are actively maintained and provide a key mark of distinction. The community also maintains a reputation for being hard working, non-corrupt, and highly talented in agriculture, craftsmanship, and science.

German Tax Revenues at Work

¶4. (SBU) The Kazakhstani German community is heavily funded by the

German government. German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Germany's international development agency, channels millions of euros every year from Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior to help Kazakhstani Germans organize and prosper. GTZ Kazakhstan Director Rainer Goertz told us that his government sees a responsibility to support Germans, give them greater economic opportunities, and in turn stem the flow of immigration to Germany. Annegret Westphal, GTZ Central Asia minority program director, said funding aims to anchor German minority interests so they make a recognizable contribution Kazakhstani society.

15. (SBU) If anything, GTZ's German minority program in Kazakhstan is expanding. Berlin is cutting social welfare spending for minority returnees in favor of aid programs in countries of origin. GTZ has restructured its strategy to emphasize organization, language training, and youth and academic honors programs. One GTZ flagship program in Kazakhstan is the German Social Fund, a 350,000-euro investment that finances health programs for the German minority through accrued interest.

16. (SBU) Goertz said Germany's engagement on behalf of the minority is a sign that it will have to be taken seriously in Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstani government, however, is watching GTZ activities with a certain "curiosity". Westphal reported instances when aid to ethnic Germans has created tensions within their communities. One example was a winter relief program for rural Germans. The sight of German families in remote villages receiving much-needed supplies during a harsh winter embittered their non-German neighbors, and Westphal said GTZ will not renew the program due to Kazakhstani government unwillingness to co-finance it.

Organization: German Efficiency with a Soviet Mentality

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17. (SBU) Overall, the GTZ has been successful, as is evident in the strength of the completely Berlin-funded Association of the Civil Society Organizations of the Germans of Kazakhstan. The Association is an umbrella organization that unites 23 German community centers, called "Rebirths", which use earmarked GTZ funds to run language, youth, social, and humanitarian programs. Kazakhstan is the only country in the CIS where a single German umbrella organization operates nationally. Kazakhstan's Assembly of Peoples consistently recognizes the Germans as among the country's best organized minority communities.

18. (SBU) The Astana Rebirth has all the expected trimmings of an active community center: national crafts and excursion photos covering the walls, a German-language library, a dining room, a computer lab. Its most important activities are a German Sunday school, in which around 35 children participate each week, and free bi-weekly German language lessons. The Rebirth works closely with the Astana German School, one of six public schools in Kazakhstan which have mandatory German language instruction within a Russian-language curriculum. The school's deputy director told us that about 25 percent of the students are ethnic Germans.

19. (SBU) Aleksandr Dederer, founding president of the national Association, is the most important figure in the German community. He was the impetus for initiating a national German minority movement in the early 1990s and deserves credit for the Association's superb organization. Interlocutors stressed Dederer's influence and personal relationship with President Nazarbayev. (Comment: Dederer's office is adorned with photographs of himself with the Kazakhstani leader. End Comment.) Despite his successes, some voices in the German minority community criticized Dederer for his authoritarian style. Westphal reported that since founding the Association in 1992, Dederer has developed a reputation for being an inflexible leader with a preference for a rigid top-down structure. Much to the dismay of German government sponsors, three Rebirths have even withdrawn from the Association due to disagreements with Dederer.

¶10. (SBU) The German-Kazakhstani Association of Entrepreneurs (DKAU), also chaired by Aleksandr Dederer, is the chamber of commerce of the German minority. Its 54 member-companies encompass almost 13,000 employees and are most active in international trade, foodstuffs and agriculture, construction, and machine tools. The DKAU's largest member enterprises are Ivolga-Holding, which purportedly controls 10-percent of Kazakhstan's agricultural production, Gold Product, with 21 percent of Kazakhstan's wine production, and Rakhat, one of the country's largest confection producers. One of the DKAU's most important goals is to expand investment relationships and knowledge transfer between Germany and Kazakhstan. The DKAU claims this exchange strengthens the economic potential of the German minority and contributes to its continued stability and organization.

¶11. (SBU) Another chief DKAU goal is to represent member interests before state bodies. Dederer's DKAU Deputy, Nadezhda Burluzkaya, related events surrounding the company Gold Product and its ethnic German owner Yury Vegelin. She claimed that Vegelin turned thousands of hectares of failing vineyards into a successful and environmentally-friendly enterprise that filled 150,000 bottles of wine per day and produced a range of fruit and vegetable juices. His success attracted the attention of the financial police, who, accusing him of tax crimes, placed him under house arrest and threatened to seize his assets. According to Burluzkaya, DKAU, with the personal high-level involvement of Dederer, fought a meticulous, bribe-free legal battle to protect its member company. Vegelin was eventually cleared of the charges and remains president of Gold Product. Burluzkaya said the success of Dederer and DKAU attracted several companies, including the non-German Rakhat confection company, to DKAU for the protection it offered against state harassment.

Media: Wedded to the State, For Now

¶12. (SBU) The official newspaper of Kazakhstan's Germans is the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (DAZ). This German-Russian publication, available in print and on the internet, is owned by Dederer's Association but gets 90 percent of its funding from the Kazakhstani Ministry of Information. The money comes with the requirement that 98 pages per year be dedicated to "intercultural understanding". Ulf Seegers, DAZ German edition editor, said the requirement resulted in excessive reporting on cultural festivals and he lamented the toll it took on the newspaper's quality. DAZ is also

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required to regularly send to the Ministry of Information lists of headlines, authors, and word counts for all articles published. The paper practices self-censorship and avoids sensitive political topics like President Nazarbayev and his family, Seegers reported.

¶13. (SBU) Seegers, who wrote his graduate thesis on transforming the DAZ, envisions a newspaper less reliant on Ministry funds and more directly targeted at the German minority. He alleged the DAZ is routinely asked for bribes from Ministry of Information officials, which it always declines to pay, resulting in delays in disbursement of its financial support from the Ministry. He said the paper could better be financed through advertisements. A prerequisite for this would be that the paper circulate more widely among the broad German minority community itself -- rather than among German expatriates and internet readers as it currently does -- which is a key long-term goal of the DAZ.

Science: Einsteins of the Steppe

¶14. (SBU) Some of Kazakhstan's most accomplished scientists are ethnic Germans. Ernst Boos, an astrophysicist who chairs the German Scientific Society in Kazakhstan, claimed the Kazakhstani government

spends an average of just three dollars per citizen for scientific research annually. German government aid to the German Scientific Society promotes scholarship in Kazakhstan by giving under-funded scientists the opportunity to publish articles for free, present findings at academic conferences, and deepen scholarly ties with German-speaking countries. Boos stated that being an ethnic German has boosted his reputation as a scientist, but familiar obstacles remain. He claimed that one project he headed, an "Information Silk Road" to create satellite links from Ukraine across Kazakhstan to China, was "hijacked" by a government official in its concluding phases, depriving him of credit for years of work.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Despite its rapid contraction, the German minority in Kazakhstan remains strong. Heavy German government sponsorship, established leadership, and an efficient organization mean the minority is likely to strengthen its place in Kazakhstan's national pastiche. Resistance to state encroachment, particularly in the business and media arms of Dederer's organization, as well as the prominence of German scholars, demonstrate that the German minority is more than a showpiece in President Nazarbayev's campaign to advertise cultural harmony in Kazakhstan. End Comment.

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